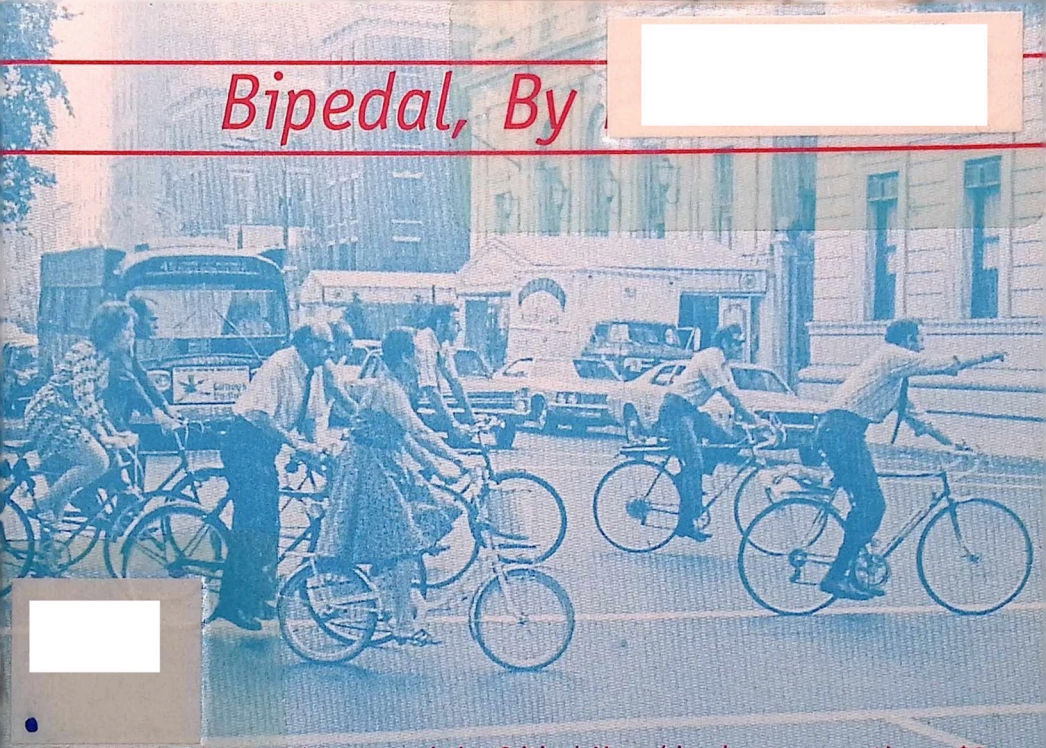
Bipedal, By



Experiences & thoughts around the Critical Mass bicycle movement! $2

Mass Transit in Practice: The Who, What, Where, When, Why, and How of Critical Mass

For four years I've wanted to do a zine about my experiences with critical mass bike rides. I wanted to explain to new people the reasons and intentions behind the ride and to have a handy resource to give to people who I would run into during the ride - the curious or maybe just less than antagonistic types who could use a little education about what we were doing.

Then Chris Carlson assembled a Critical Mass book and I shelved my project; thinking it would be secondary and unimportant in the shadow of his book. Now, years later I realize that the zine serves an entirely different audience due to the versatility of zines (Do you think Chris Carlson gives away copies of his book from his fanny pack while traveling? Ahh, the beauty of the medium!). I wonder how many of my contemporaries have read that book or how curious motorists would be turned on to it. So I picked up my project again and hope that I can fill some of that void.

Please write with comments, questions, or suggestions. While this in its intent is a single issue deal, I would be interested in doing revisions for the reprint.

Some of the content here is meant to update the original Critical Mass zine "We aren't Blockin Traffic, We Are Traffic" and some of the material here is reprinted directly.

Artwork by Matt Gauck, Sparky Taylor, Andy Singer, Fly, and more. Some old CM stuff used with liberal self-permission. Copyright and respect are complicated issues. Act accordingly.

Take care.
Joe Biel
[redacted]
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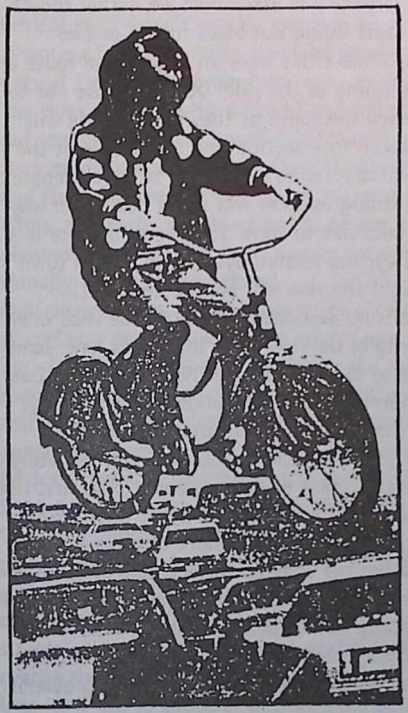
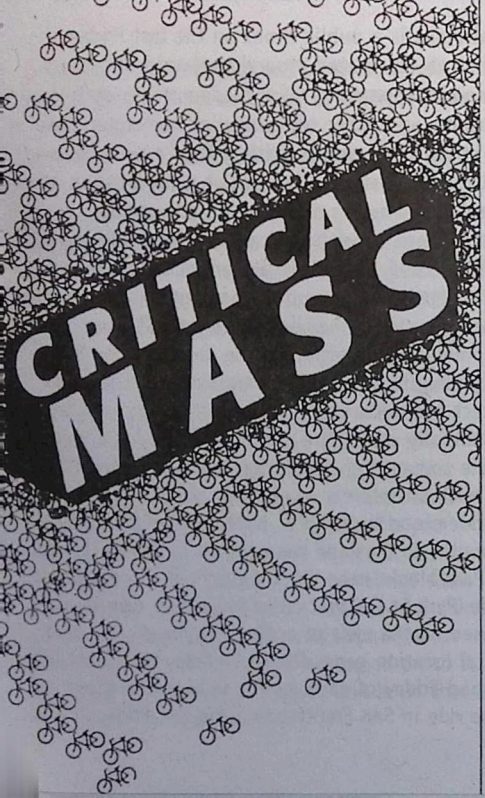


Critical Mass is a public event on the last Friday of every month celebrated around the world. Bicyclists and also skateboarders, roller bladers, roller skaters, pedestrians, and other self-propelled commuters take to the streets in a group. Critical Mass events have no official leader. Participants meet at a set location and time and travel as a group through city streets.

My first experience with Critical Mass was reading about it in 1995. It seemed like an incredible concept; dozens or hundreds of cyclists congregating together to celebrate bicycles, remembering they aren't alone in cycle commuting, questioning the dominate car culture and city planning that infects most of our cities, and to protect each other from being hit by cars - through being mutually supportive and more visible as a group. The cycle commuting population and other curious people with an interest in cycling, meet up in a common, understood location at 5:30 on the last Friday of each month. In Portland we meet up in the north side of the Park blocks near the big elephant (downtown at Burnside/Park St.). Other cities have their own location based on the ease of accessibility and some kind of central location generally. In Berkeley they meet on the second Friday of each month as to not conflict with the ride in San Francisco on the last Friday.



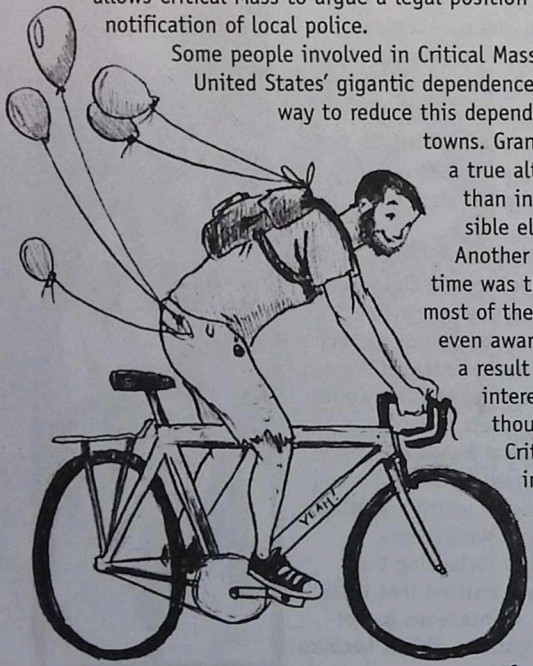
After everyone has assembled we gather together and start riding our bikes in one or two groups. Some cities have an understood route at the beginning of the ride. Others choose not to and decide the route as they go. The ride will arrive at an intersection and the people at the front will determine which way to go or people with a strong opinion will shout out which way they would like to turn. Sometimes if there is a special cycling related event going on in town that night the ride will be directed to it.

If there is no destination then the ride ends when a majority of the riders lose interest or have somewhere else to be. Sometimes rides can last as long as 3 hours and can snake around the entire city!

I first saw the event take shape in Cleveland around 1997. It wasn't quite the mythical story I had been reading or hearing about. The first ride I participated in was with 6 other riders. With such a small group we weren't terribly visible or dominating the streets. In fact, due to the landscape and city planning of Cleveland - most people actually had to DRIVE to the Critical Mass ride. While everyone had a good attitude and was well intentioned there were a few problems.

Critical Mass wasn't exactly creating an alternative to car culture when most of the people involved were participating in it.
Critical Mass is self-organized, non-commercial and non-competitive. The rides operate with diffused and informal decision-making – without leaders. Most are unofficial; ignoring permits and official sanction from municipal authorities. Usually only the meeting place(s), date and time are fixed. Destinations are rarely even pre-planned. In some cities, the route, finishing point, or attractions along the way may be planned ahead so the route can be established with riders (and occasionally - police) beforehand.
Participants have differing purposes – celebrating comfort in a group of cyclists, demonstrating the advantages of cycling in a city; bringing attention to issues of facilities and safety; enjoying car-free social time on city streets; confronting police, motorists, or dominant culture; and a great variety of other purposes, many unstated. Most people just come for fun with no intended protest or political agenda. Critical Mass rides are frequently perceived as protest activities. A 2006 *New Yorker* magazine article described Critical Mass's activity as "monthly political-protest rides", and characterized Critical Mass as a part of a larger social movement. A British website, which advertises and publishes photographs of the London Critical Mass events, describes this as "the monthly protest by cyclists reclaiming the streets". However, Critical Mass participants have insisted that these events should be viewed as "celebrations" and spontaneous gatherings, and not as protests or organized demonstrations. This is because

people come to Critical Mass with so many varying agendas or no agenda at all. This stance also allows Critical Mass to argue a legal position that its events can occur without advance notification of local police.



Some people involved in Critical Mass are avid cyclists as a way to protest the United States' gigantic dependence on oil for automobiles. We see cycling as a way to reduce this dependence while commuting within our cities and towns. Granted, in Portland it's a bit easier to use this as a true alternative and never step into an automobile than in many other places but nonetheless it is possible elsewhere.

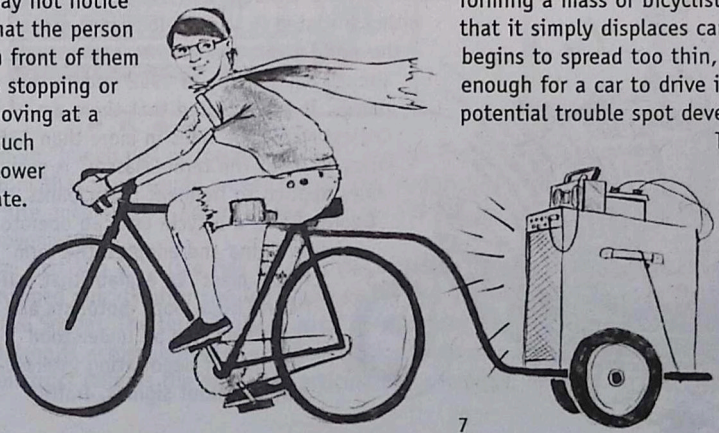
Another problem with the rides in Cleveland at that time was that it was organized by the punks and so most of the true cycle commuters from the city weren't even aware of the rides. It was a cultural ghetto and as a result died out over time from lack of continued interest. I hear that new people have taken it on though and it's now stronger than ever.

Critical Mass rides vary greatly in many respects, including frequency and number of participants. For example, many small cities have monthly Critical Mass rides with fewer than twenty riders, Budapest cyclists hold only two rides each year on Car Free Day (September 22) and Earth Day that attract tens of thousands of riders. The April 22,

2007 Budapest ride participation was generally estimated around 50,000 riders.

Yeah, but how does it work?

I imagine that Critical Mass tactics were built and refined slowly over the first few years in San Francisco. In addition to riding in big groups and being clustered together, Critical Mass moves relatively slow. This occasionally causes accidents within the ride as one rider may not notice that the person in front of them is stopping or moving at a much slower rate.



The reason that the ride moves so slowly is to keep everyone together. When there are more than a dozen riders (let alone a group of 500+) it gets increasingly difficult to keep everyone together due to traffic control signals and other traffic. By moving slowly it allows the riders to catch up if they get stopped or stuck. It also allows people to easily move from the back to the front of even the largest ride with relative ease. Think of Critical Mass as a density. It works by forming a mass of bicyclists so dense and tight that it simply displaces cars. Anytime the ride begins to spread too thin, with areas large enough for a car to drive into, you have a potential trouble spot developing.

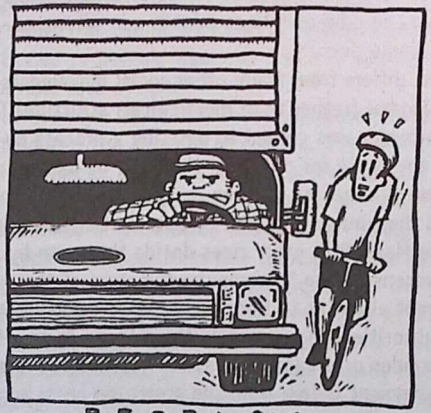
The purpose of Critical Mass is not formalized beyond meeting and carrying out the event, creating a public space where automobiles are displaced to make room for alternatives. One commonly used slo-

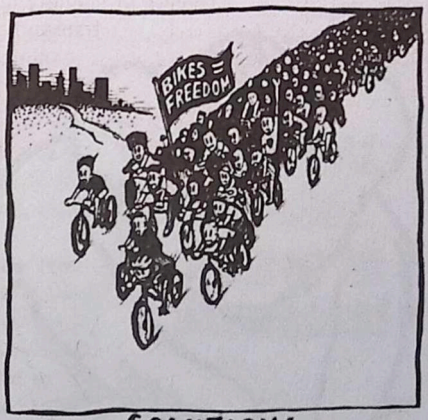
gan is *We Are Traffic.* All participants, being equal in leadership, are thought to have equivalent claim to their own intentions and the purpose of the ride. Critical Mass grew alongside and probably in conjunction with the environmental movement, which cites private automobile use as catastrophic to the global and local environment, in physical and social terms. Many do not ride in opposition to anything: they simply enjoy an opportunity to cycle socially and in safety, or in a boisterous and celebratory crowd.

History and organization of the rides

The first San Francisco ride, with 48 riders, began at 6 p.m., Friday, September 25, 1992, although it did not come to be called Critical Mass until the second ride, on Friday, October 30, 1992 (with 85 riders). Its name soon was adopted as a generic label by participants in similar but independent mass rides that were either initiated in various locations around the world at around the same time, or had already existed before 1992 under other names. It is estimated that there are Critical Mass-type rides in more than 325 cities to date. The term "Masser" is sometimes applied to frequent participants.

George Bliss, a bicycle pedicab operator, visited China and adopted the term "critical mass" to explain that traffic in China, both motorists and bicyclists had an understood method of negotiating intersections without signals. Traffic

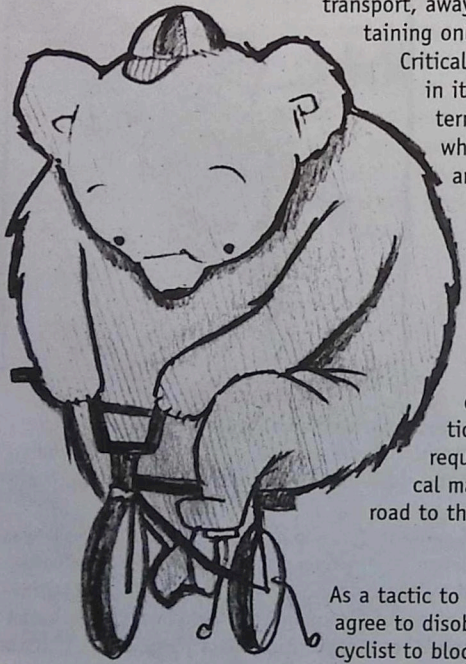




would "bunch up" at these intersections until the back log reached a "critical mass" at which point that mass would move through the intersection. This description was related in the Ted White documentary *Return of the Scorcher* (1992) and subsequently adopted by the Critical Mass movement.

The first San Francisco ride in 1992 was titled *Commute Clot*, though this awkward moniker was changed quickly after the Ted White movie was shown, at the suggestion of bicycling advocate Dave Snyder. The term "critical mass" is also used by social theorists who posit that a social revolution is achievable after a certain critical mass of popular support is demonstrated. This social construct reflects the ambition, articulated or implied, of many Critical Mass participants that the

balance of mobility in cities must change toward bicycling or other modes of transport, away from the now-dominant private car, often containing only a single person.



Critical Mass differs from many other social movements in its rhizomal (rather than hierarchical) structure. The term *xerocracy* was coined to describe a process by which the route for a Critical Mass can be decided: anyone who has an opinion makes their own map and distributes it to the cyclists participating in the Mass. Still other rides decide the route by consensus. The "disorganized" nature of the event allows it to largely escape clampdown by authorities who may view the rides as forms of parades or organized protest. Additionally, the movement is free from the structural costs associated with a centralized, hierarchical organization. In order for the event to function, the only requirement is a sufficient turn-out to create a "critical mass" of riders dense enough to occupy a piece of road to the exclusion of motorized road users.

What is "corking" traffic? Why?

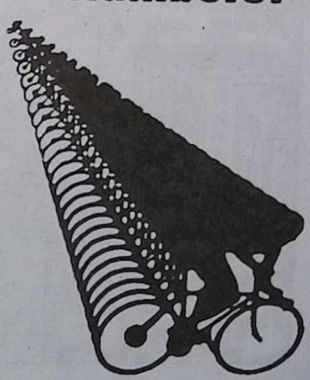
As a tactic to keep rides together, the group will generally agree to disobey traffic lights. This is done safely by placing a cyclist to block or "cork" oncoming traffic that would have the

right of way normally. This person is sometimes in a position of danger when motorists get angry or violent at the idea of waiting a minute or two for the ride to pass when they have been conditioned to believe they can use their car as a way to get from point A to point B at the highest possible rate of speed.

On November 20, 1992, Joel Pomerantz created a flyer which introduced the concept of corking. The corking dynamic is similar to that of a parade. Riders sometimes take advantage of their time corking to distribute flyers, circle in an intersection, or lift their bikes in a tradition known as a Chicago hold-up.

Cyclists in Critical Mass ride through Times Square in New York City on July 30, 2004 - Critics argue that the practice of corking roads in order to pass through red lights as a group is contrary to Critical Mass' claim that "we are traffic", since ordinary traffic (including bicycle traffic) does not usually have the right to go through intersections once the traffic signal has changed to red, unless issued with a specific permit or residing in jurisdictions where bicyclists have this right. Occasionally, this results in violence or arrests during Critical Mass rides.

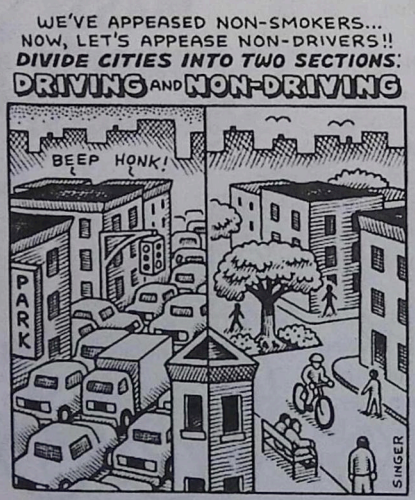
I've seen a few incredibly tense moments where motorists have gotten out of their cars in response to being stopped or revving their engines to show their disdain. For the most part motorists are surprisingly supportive and encouraging – even when they are being inconvenienced. But that doesn't always make you feel better when you are facing a potentially violent situation. In my experience the best results are reached by remaining calm and



standing your ground. Explain the safety and reasons for using "corks" and politely ask them if they could just wait a minute or two for the ride to pass. Sometimes motorists will be incredibly confrontational and antagonistic and it can be safer just to let them pass than to risk injury to riders.

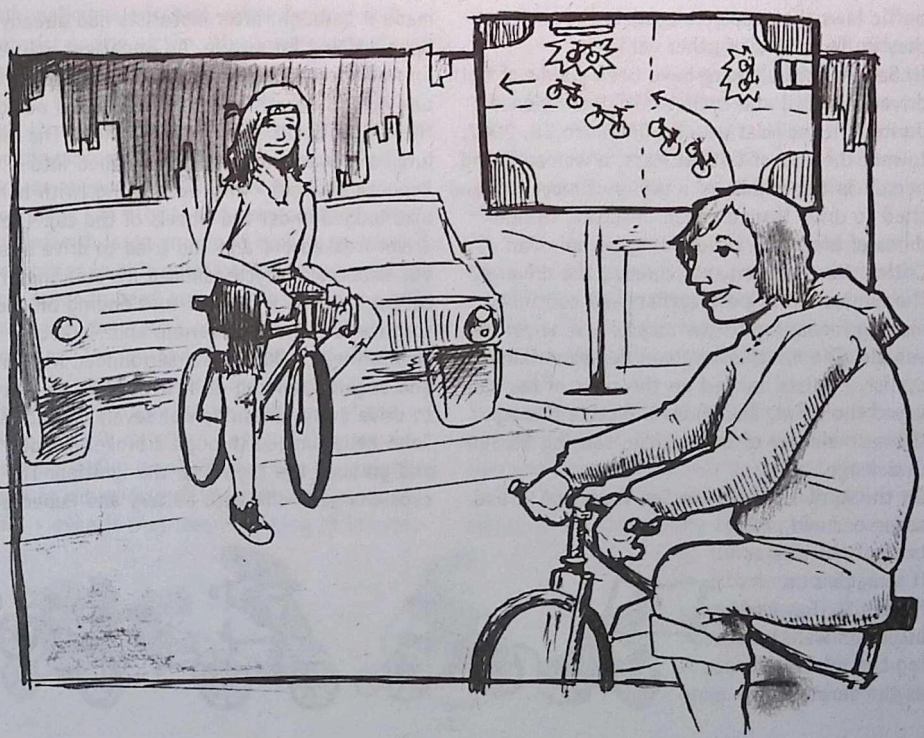
Social Implication

The name of the event has been subjected to word play in many contexts, ranging from advertising campaigns for commercial products to numerous other public events, some with only remote similarities to Critical Mass. The extensive news coverage of San Francisco's July 1997 ride spawned an international celebration of bicycling, called Bike Summer. The Rand Corporation produced a white paper entitled "What Next for Networks and Netwars?" analyzing the tactics of the ride, as part of an evaluation of decentralized decision-making for potential military battlefield use.



Some riders break traffic laws?

On the 12th Anniversary ride in London, critics claimed that Critical Mass is a deliberate attempt to obstruct automotive traffic and cause a disruption of normal city functions, asserting that individuals taking part in Critical Mass refuse to obey the vehicular



traffic laws that apply to cyclists the same as they do to drivers of other vehicles.

In San Francisco, there have been claims of both driver-initiated and cyclist-initiated violence during Critical Mass events. On March 30, 2007, toward the end of Critical Mass, a woman found herself in the middle of a group of bicyclists and tried to drive through them resulting in hundreds of bicyclists surrounding her minivan. Critical Mass participants claimed the driver of the minivan struck a bicyclist, and continued moving forward until the bicycle was under her vehicle. The driver of the van denies striking the cyclist. Cyclists banged on the sides of her car, keyed the paint, and threw a bicycle through the rear window of the vehicle, causing $5,300 in damage.

On the April 1997 ride in San Francisco, a bad scene occured at the back of the ride as it straggled up Market St. Too few bicyclists were holding the intersections as the slower riders made it through, after motorists had already been waiting for awhile. An impatient man in an Audi pushed his way into the bikes, knocking one person down. The rider got up and out of the way with his bike, mostly unhurt. The driver lunged forward suddenly and smahed into Rebecca Seybold - who went flying, with her bike lodged under the wheels of the car. The driver freaked out and and tried to drive away but Rebecca's bicycle jammed his steering and he got stuck in a futile U-turn ending on the southwest corner of Guerrero and Market. Meanwhile, 20-30 cyclists surrounded his car and began pounding on it with locks as he tried to drive away, smashing out several windows. John Kelly jumped through a broken window and grabbed the keys from the ignition. The cops charged John with battery and Rebecca

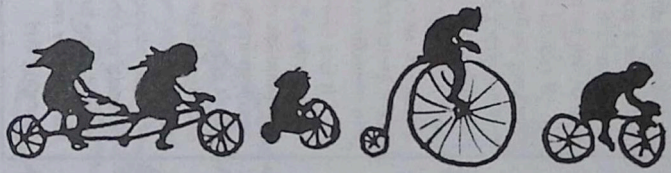
with malicious mischief, characterizing the motorist as the victim. All charges were dropped four months later.

Should Critical Mass riders obey the same traffic laws that motorized traffic follows? Yes and No. For the most part, traffic laws were made for cars, as anyone who routinely bicycles through stop signs can attest, and they certainly weren't written with large groups of cyclists in mind. So the answer to this question is obvious - *Critical Mass tends to bend or ignore the existing traffic laws when the group's safety and effectiveness are protected. The law should be followed when it promotes safety and protects the needs of the group.* Often times it is in the best interest of the group to stick together – even if that means breaking traffic laws. Keeping cars from getting stuck in the middle of the mass is also much safer – even if that means corking at intersections and running red lights.

It should be stated though that not all riders are comfortable breaking traffic laws – on basic moral ground, fear of the law, or just a programmed sensibility that it's a flawed concept. San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom, in April 2007, requested that Critical Mass riders "police themselves."

"It does the bicycle-advocacy community no good to have people that are aggressive and dispirit the entire movement," Newsom said. "I would encourage the bicycle coalition to say, 'Look, we don't put up with this, enough is enough.'"

Since every participant in Critical Mass has a different motive - many riders get frustrated by this and debate the need for unified motives and no tolerance for people who jeopardize the safety and sustainability of the ride. I, personally, think it is very important to accept that not everyone has the same agenda and to understand, if not embrace that, in order to not try and con-



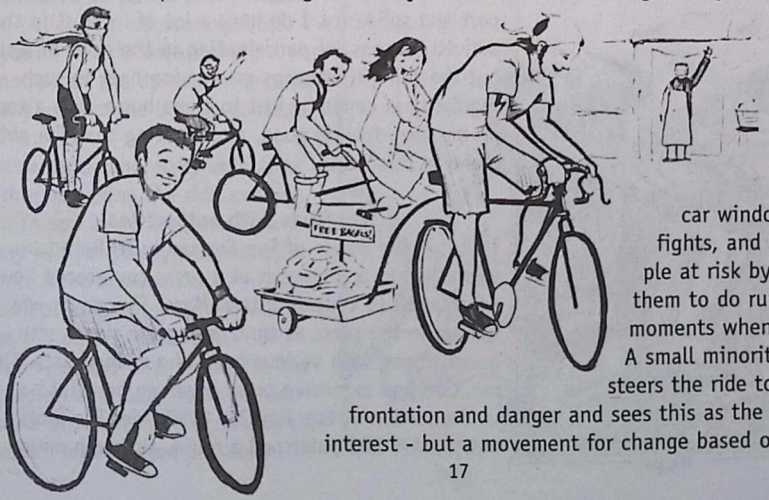
RADICAL PATIENCE

Many of us attracted to radical politics are very impatient—with the larger society, but also with ourselves and especially with people who don't see how much better life could be if our radical visions were pursued. This impatience with the slow development of organic human communities, communities that might really be able to construct a different logic to our daily lives, often leads to childish and simplistic confrontational stances. These postures are much more about reassuring ourselves that we are truly radical and willing to face danger than they are about contesting the organization of modern life.

If radical bicyclists are so hot to go on freeways, then instead of blocking traffic lanes why not wait for rush hour gridlock and then overwhelm the already stopped cars with dozens or hundreds of bicycles streaming through the traffic, departing the freeway at the next exit after a convincing demonstration of the ease, superiority and pleasure of bicycling? Imagine the surprise and support one might generate if such an intervention was carried out with courtesy and friendliness?

It is a terribly rash assumption that someone stuck in their car is necessarily a big supporter of the status quo. Consider instead the complexities of human choices and constraints and try to create openings in people's minds, rather than assuming that someone who hasn't adopted your choices about what to buy, how to get around, and lifestyles in general is your conscious enemy and deserves your moral condemnation, rage, or self-righteous taunting. It's not easy to proceed politically when we take seriously how difficult, deep and personal are the changes we seek. But pleasure, passion, and patience can bring real progress. Remember, the Americans you scorn today must be your allies tomorrow if you are serious about changing life!

trol everyone's actions and behavior. Some people are more reserved in their activism, what they willing to risk, breaking the law, or just simply cannot afford to potentially pay tickets or deal with legal troubles for running red lights. Because of these reasons they choose a more passive approach. Some people are frustrated by the more liberal and passive types and as a result choose more militant and aggressive activism to accommodate this. Often I feel this is just a product of living in a macho society but I also feel it's not up to my judgment to tell someone how to behave in such a freeform activity. Some people function as tourists with no respect for the long term goals or sustainability of the event. They will instigate and escalate violence with motorists and the public, reducing the safety of the ride. These are generally the people who the media picks up on first and broadcast as the norm. I've seen riders slash car tires, scream inside car windows, instigate fights, and put other people at risk by encouraging them to do run stoplights at moments when it is unsafe. A small minority frequently steers the ride towards confrontation and danger and sees this as the group's best interest - but a movement for change based on a reclaiming



of public space and the building of human community, open to people from across the social and political spectrum, could contribute to a deeper and more fundamental change in the way our society operates.

Moments like these can be diffused through humor. On a 1992 Berkeley Critical Mass ride, a particularly obnoxious cyclist tried to lead the ride onto an interstate onramp. A witty rebuttal was "Follow thtat ***cop*** to the freeway!"

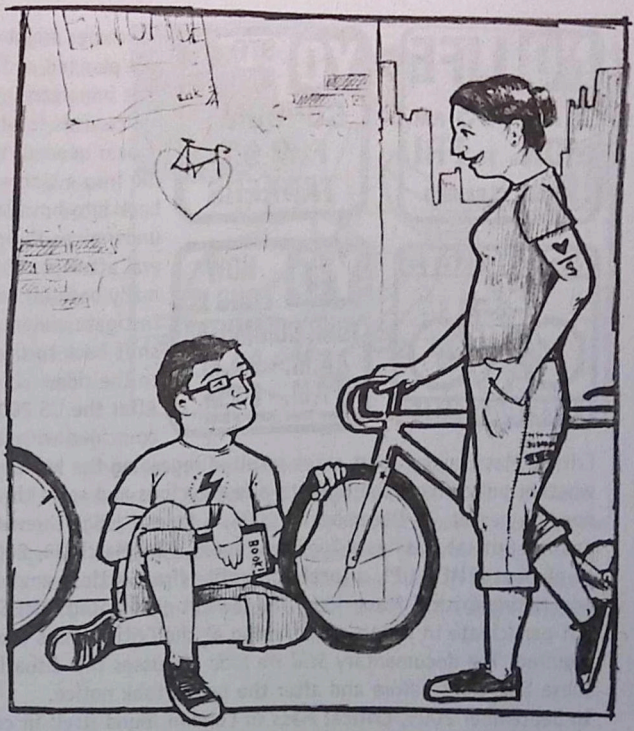
For me Critical Mass was always just a way to have a positive feeling and to feel like I am a part of something bigger than myself. When a cyclist gets killed the rides generally swell to huge numbers and there is an overwhelming sense of support and solidarity. I do have a lot of interest in the activist reasons for participating in the rides as well but the thing that keeps me coming back in such regularity is generally just to come home with a smile on my face, feeling good, and knowing that I'm not alone in this world.

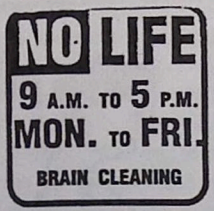
Conflicts with authorities

In 1997, the mayor of San Francisco, Willie Brown, was asked by a journalist at a press conference how he planned to control Critical Mass. The mayor was quoted in the press as threatening the riders with arrest, along with various belittling of bicyclists. The reaction and extensive press coverage grew into a confrontation at the July 25, 1997 ride. The local newspapers had published a route, although many

riders were hesitant about—or flatly against—cooperation with it. On Friday the mayor addressed the crowd at the Embarcadero meeting place but was shouted down. The crowd of approximately 7,000 bicyclists quickly split into many parts, each being chased or monitored by police units, including helicopter monitoring. This resulted in extensive turmoil throughout the downtown area and many arrests and bicycle confiscations.

Police tactics normally default to either attacking the ride and trying to spur a confrontation that they will inevitably win through sheer force and numbers - or they attempt to portray themselves as the protectors, endorsers, - or even sponsors of the ride! On one occasion at a Bay Area ride, the police announced "Welcome to this event!" and greeted people. A





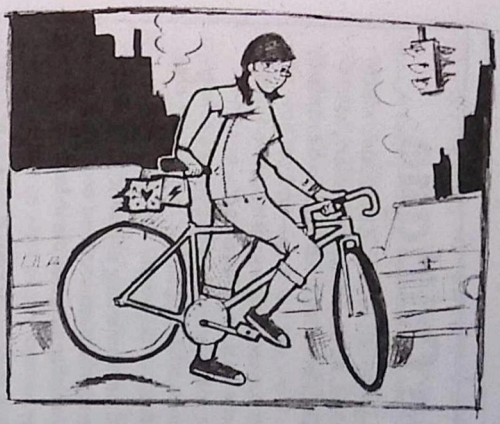
newcomer might be led to believe that the police had planned and executed the ride.

It is important not to escalate violence with the police. This is what they want. It makes them appear needed. When the police request the ride to file into a single lane, it is best to comply and file back into both lanes after they disappear. This undermines their tactic of confrontation. After several attempts at controlling the ride, the police normally back off, realizing that they would have to instigate violence or arrest everyone. This causes a shift back to the tactic of acting like public servants to the ride.

After the US 2004 Republican National Convention coincided with the August 2004 New York City Critical Mass, many court cases resulted regarding the legality of the ride, confronting issues of whether police have the right to arrest cyclists and seize their bicycles, and whether the event needs a permit. In December of 2004, a federal judge threw out New York City's injunction against Critical Mass as a "political event.". On March 23, 2005, the city filed a lawsuit, seeking to prevent TIME'S UP!, a local nonprofit, direct action, environmental group, from promoting or advertising Critical Mass rides. The lawsuit also stated TIME'S UP! and the general public could not participate in riding or gathering at the Critical Mass bike ride, claiming a permit was required. The documentary *Still We Ride* discusses this situation in detail and shows the nature of these bike rides before and after the police took notice.

In September 2005, Critical Mass in London found itself in conflict with public law enforcement

when the Metropolitan Police gave out notices announcing a requirement that the organizers of the mass report a route six days before the event. In addition, they stated that the mass may be restricted in the future, and arrests would result if their orders were not followed. The threat was quickly moderated when politicians and cyclist groups voiced objections. The following ride - on October 2005 - was tremendously well attended, with estimates approaching 1,200 participants. There was a long stop in Parliament Square, part of the Government's exclusion area in the Serious Organised Crime and Police Act 2005. However, this event also led to a particularly slow and cumbersome ride which brought some debate from London cycling groups.



Another consequence of the police notice was that a participant sought a declaration from the High Court of England and Wales that there was no requirement to seek police permission for the Critical Mass rides. After what the judgment describes as a "friendly action" in which the claimant and the police agreed not to seek damages, the Court's ruling on June 27, 2006 agreed that the Critical Mass rides did not fall within section 11 of the Public Order Act 1986 and therefore no notice had to be given.

Massive Critique

So much of our lives we are forced to accept situations which we have not chosen for ourselves. As consumers, as voters, as employees, we allow crucial decisions about our lives to be made by other, more powerful people. How sad it is then—and yet how predictable—that our movements for social change are so often cursed with this same problem. When we join a political party, or sign a petition, or take part in a rally, more often than not we are simply accepting someone else's opinion, chanting slogans we did not create, and endorsing laws we do not understand.

Critical Mass is, or should be, something different . . . A space where people do not have ideas or actions imposed on them, where people can take an active, rather than passive role in building a livable future, in however small a way.

Because no one is in charge on our monthly ride, and no specific ideology is set forth, participants are free to invent their own reasons for being here. The lively Xerocracy that has sprung up, the preponderance of flags and hand-painted signs—not to mention the fact that Critical Mass is spreading to other cities—these things are all signs that we are doing something right. Unfortunately, not everyone sees things this way.

The Horse and the Rider

There are those who enjoy Critical Mass and regularly participate, but who criticize the ride for its formlessness and what is called its "apolitical" nature. For these people, the task at hand is to politicize the ride by setting up some sort of steering committee, complete with chants, bullhorns and official security (in day-glo jackets, no doubt). If you listen carefully, you can hear talk of "pulling in the reins," "harnessing" the energy of Critical Mass in order to attain some worthy, though predetermined, political goal.

But who is the rider here? And who the proverbial horse? Not only are such analogies absurd and repulsive, but the approach is

counter-productive, as those who have been to or heard of the over-organized but sparsely attended Santa Cruz ride can attest.

Tyranny of the Minority

Another group who would seek to impose the stamp of their political ambitions on Critical Mass, and who have been to some extent more successful, are those who advocate an aggressive, antagonistic stance for the ride. Tactics along these lines have included surrounding and harrassing motorists who inch toward the Mass, baiting the police, and pedaling up to the front of the ride and abruptly turning off the agreed route in an attempt to "hijack" the ride.

The purpose is presumably to "radicalize" Critical Mass by pushing it in a more confrontational, even violent direction, an idea that recalls Chomsky's comment that tactics, in and of themselves, do not amount to radicalism.

What both of these approaches share is an impatience with the slow, painstaking task of educating others and organizing toward a future worth living. A truly radical approach to the social problems we face would be to build community and to offer an alternative—a fact that apparently eludes those who believe people have to be tricked or stampeded into creating a better world.

Obviously, no one should be barred from expressing themselves or sharing their thoughts or opinions. We all want to see Critical Mass be a space where diverse political strategies can be debated and experimented with. The point is that if you want to see Critical Mass go in this or that direction, make copies of your ideas and pass them around. Only cowards and authoritarians shrink from the challenge of persuasion!

It could be that all we're doing is riding from HERE to THERE on bikes. But what is so amazing is that in attempting such a simple task, so many important and provocative questions come up. For a moment, a window is opened onto a possible future: a future where no one is in charge and most people ride a bike!

–Reprinted from a handout distributed at the Nov. 12 East Bay Critical Mass

Who rides in Critical Mass?

Anyone who wants to participate is welcome to - though the general regular group of attendees are cycle commuters, punks, recreational cyclists, and curious newcomers with an interest in bicycles. Attendees do not have a strict political dichotomy and it is unfair to assume that everyone has the same intentions or that just because one rider is violent or aggressive that it is the norm. While many urban bicycle riders take part in Critical Mass rides to assert their rights as cyclists, Critical Mass does not enjoy the support of the entire cycling community. Many others echo critiques that the very style of a "leaderless" ride works to perpetuate the negative stereotype of urban cyclists as careless and even hazardous.

The rides do, however, serve as effective social network-builders, enabling a swath of bicycle commuters from the same urban area to become acquaintances and share stories of urban cycling struggle and survival. Any bicycle advocacy issues are usually left as the domain of a minority of committed indi-

viduals within the group, who often use the Critical Mass forum and resulting social network to monitor the pulse of cyclists' needs. The ride is generally self sufficient and riders will often provide tools to other riders who are in need of them.
The lack of leaders in Critical Mass is occasionally frustrating and confusing for cops and motorists. A lot of times they want to talk to or negotiate with "the person in charge".

Where is it?

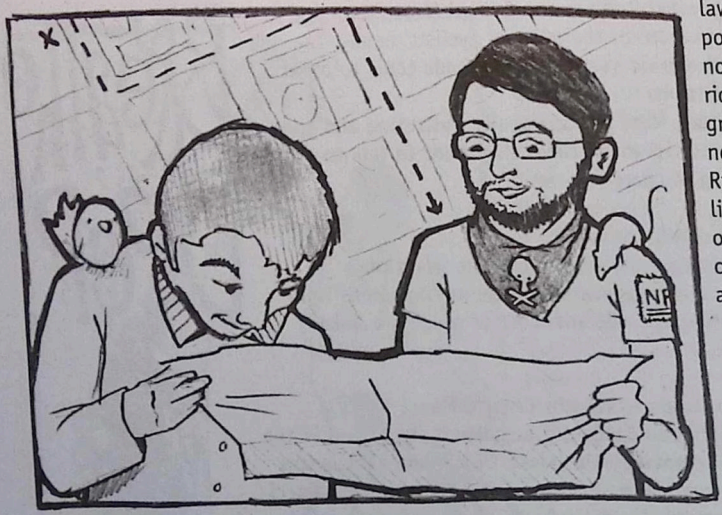
Critical Mass meets in virtually every city around the world on a monthly basis at a regular meet up location. There are numerous websites dedicated to a specific city's ride and most of which are linked from www.critical-mass.org

Is it dangerous to ride in Critical Mass?

Riding in Critical Mass is about as dangerous as getting out of bed in the morning, taking a shower, or leaving your house. Some days that means there is no level of danger and other times you risk angry motorists, accidents among riders, and cops looking for a fight. If you behave properly and don't work to escalate these problems it can be very safe and relaxing.

Alternative Mass

Due to increased police presence and frustration with the fact that different riders have different behaviors and goals, Critical Mass at one point decided to create multiple rides on the same day from different points. People who wanted to obey the



laws, avoid some of the police harassment, and not deal with obnoxious riders could ride in a group doing just that and not have to pay the price. Riders who wanted to run lights and be more antagonistic could ride the conventional mass and do as they pleased.

Legal Support for Critical Mass

Occasionally when the legal bills pile up for some participants of Critical Mass who are "made examples of" it can get quite expensive for a hobby. To offset this problem, lawyers interested in bicycle infrastructure will often work pro-bono to defend these clients in a way to gain a name among the cycling scene and protect the rights of the innocent.

Start Your Own Critical Mass Ride

It's as simple as picking a location in your town and making flyers and posts on the internet for

other cyclists. Be observant first though and investigate if there is already an existing ride in your town. The rewards far outweigh the social gains to be had by meeting new friends, people with similar experiences, and just having a fun and safe bike ride!

You can leave flyers on people's bicycles you see around town. Small stickers can be put on anything where cyclists lock up their bikes. Bike shops and friendly businesses would probably be glad to spread the word and hang posters. Word of mouth as well as local radio programs and newspapers can bring in the hardest people to reach.

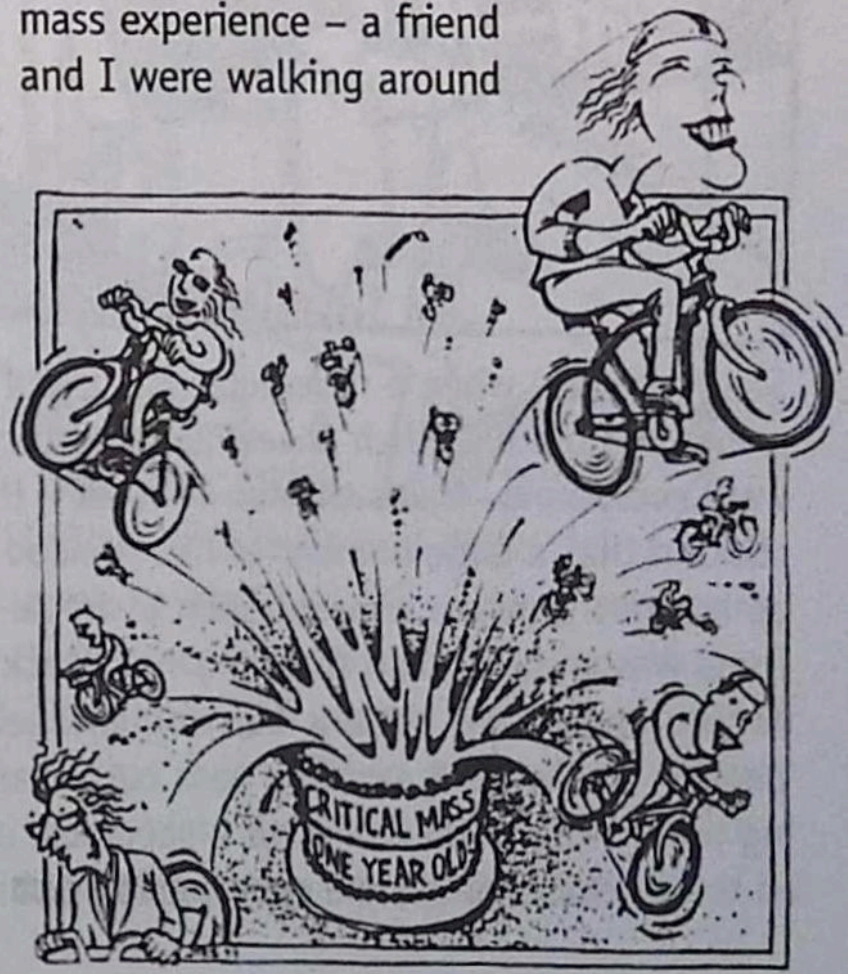
Because bicyclists of varying skill will be presumably taking part, planning an easy ride without a lot of twists and turns will keep the ride safter and more fun. A moderate pace is a good starting point. Avoiding difficult hills can be helpful as well. The streets should be large enough to accomodate large numbers of cyclists. One way streets are particularly handy for this.

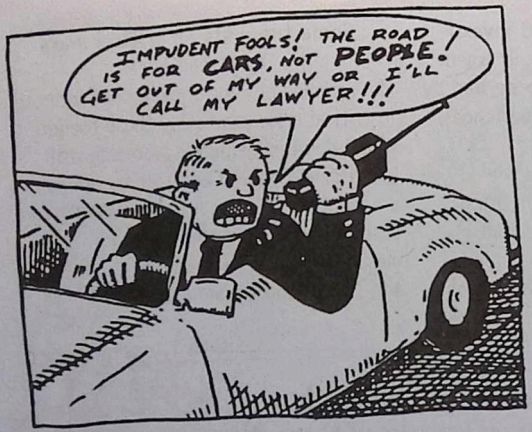
Varying the route from month to month makes each ride a bit of an adventure, and reaches a wider spectrum of people.

If you choose to draw up route maps in advance, be sure to label potentially troubling spots on the route so people know ahead of time.

Some thoughts on critical mass
by Matt Gauck

Most friends of mine show a huge interest in critical mass, especially those friends who I don't immediately associate with bike riding. Those friends, in my opinion, are what make this gathering so much fun. Case in point, my first critical mass experience – a friend and I were walking around





San Francisco, when a ridiculous amount of bike riders came over the hill, their sheer number overpowering, well, everything. That's the fun of it all – the demonstration that a large number of like-minded people can be brought together to make such a simple statement. There was an older man towing a half-stack amp, hooked up to a car battery, blasting Michael Jackson's 'beat it', and when I saw him pass by, I started cracking up. Seriously, that's funny. A spectacle of this size, an unconventional 'on the spot' parade of bicycles, is AWESOME. The looks on the faces of everyone around 'the mass' were so amused and joyful, you can't help but think this is a good thing, right?

However, it's not all thumbs up and hi-fives for everyone. I have since participated in critical masses in three different cities, and apart from the common thread of the parade atmosphere it gives off, there are always a handful of onlookers or drivers that simply aren't happy with it. I can understand where someone might get upset, if, say, they were leaving work, rushing home for something 'important'. Short distance travel, in our 21st century, has left us extremely prone to frustration. Nobody likes being late. But that's the negative way to look at it, and this is a positive demonstration, and should be seen as such. So we hold up your life for six minutes. Who cares? I assume you, the sun WILL rise tomorrow. To see hundreds of people enjoying their bicycles, enjoying their community, and enjoying life should be inspiring! I don't feel like we're drawing the chalk line in the 'us vs. them' fight – we're saying

there's always room for one more. There is a worldview, a quality of life view, that goes along with the bicycle, and that's the idea that's being paraded around the city. The spectacle does the speaking for us – to me, it's not about shouting things about the war on oil, or picking fights with SUV drivers because they're driving an SUV. That kind of arguing creates barriers. And seriously, if it were strictly an environmental concern, we'd be shooting ourselves in the foot; cars use more gas when they're idle than they do in motion. My point is simply to keep this about fun, as fun things attract more positive attention. I mean, really, riding your bike is so much fun – so keep it that way.

Critical Mass, Don't Leave it at That
Scott Larkin

Critical Mass remains a great way for bicyclists to build solidarity and communication and potentially make it easier to accomplish the ultimate goal of making cities better and safer places to bicycle. Critical Mass by itself, however, will never actually accomplish anything in this direction.

The main problem is that CM is not an activity that has teeth. This has been shown in Portland over the last few years, where it has been quite easy for the police to infiltrate, disrupt and make riding in CM more hassle than it's worth (harassment, tickets, confiscation of bicycles, etc.) The police will always have the power to do this unless CM is coupled with activities which have teeth, activities which actually put so much popular pressure on

Critical Mass isn't
BLOCKING traffic—
We ARE
Traffic!!
At the end of every workday, thousands of people pour into the streets, in what has become a central ritual of life in the late twentieth century —the daily commute. For most people, however, getting off work is not cause for celebration, or even relief. The ride home promises frustrating gridlock, disgusting air, and for us bicyclists, constant threats to our safety and well-being.
But one day a month, the ritual is transformed. Hundreds of us get together and ride through the streets on bicycles, providing motorists, as well as ourselves, with a vision of how things could be different.
We know that you aren't responsible for the organization of our cities around motorized traffic, and if we have contributed to your delay, WE'RE SORRY! But maybe you can take this opportunity to reflect on what a world without cars would be like. Or better yet, join us next time!
CRITICAL MASS
Your city here
Last working Friday of each month:
meet at a good central location at 5:30 p.m.
Upcoming dates:

decision-makers that they (those who in fact control the police) have no choice but to implement the perfectly reasonable demands of bicyclists.

Even if CM was huge enough that the people in power started to concede, they would not be able to fulfill the demands of participants if those demands are not somehow articulated.

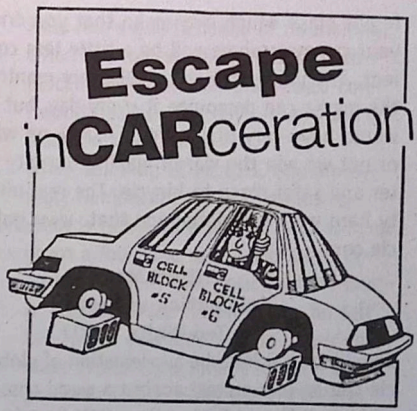
People in positions of power do not enjoy protests, but no doubt they prefer protests to things which can potentially undermine their power. (And despite it being fun, CM is a protest, not a celebration). As long as a protest goes on, these powerful businesspeople and their servants in politics can put on a sincere persona and pretend that they are concerned about the issues right

up until the protest ends, and then everyone goes back to their houses and things fall back to the status quo. But when confronted with truly democratizing forces, these same powerful

people start to sweat and make concessions and actually begin to accept a partnership because the other option will be complete defeat in the face of an organized group with solidarity.

CM is theatrical in that it is a show, a performance. There are actors and there is an audience. Unlike an actual staged play, though, there are only actors responsible for the performance. There is no director, no writer, no script, no stage manager, no coffee boys. This is part of the attraction of CM. It is a true manifestation of the anarchist vision of responsible non-authoritarianism put into practice. All participants come together by their own free will and no one follows orders from anyone else. In this way, it is a triumph. But if the main goal is to reinforce our identities as the beaten-down underdog, then CM by itself is the perfect way to accomplish this. The police can descend on the mass and squash it. The powerful businesspeople can use their contacts in the bourgeois media to sway public opinion against CM. On the other hand, if the main goal is to make bicycling better and safer, then it'll take some hard work where there is no compensation except the long-term payoff of possibly seeing better bicycling conditions implemented.

Behind the scenes work is no fun, no glamor, no showmanship, but it is the work that eventually pays off. There are many people that ride CM that spend the rest of their free time working on transportation issues that relate to bicycling, and that is invaluable. If it is to function as it should, CM will be a monthly meeting up of those working to make bicycling better and safer, and a subtle reminder to the general population that we are here, and we are working to make the world a dif-



ferent place which may mean that you driving your car everywhere will be a little less convenient. The police can crush CM every month and the media can demonize it every day, but that would have very little effect, if any, on whether or not we win the war of making our city a better and safer place to bicycle. The real nitty-gritty hard work will determine that. www.gobybicycle.com

Critical Mass
Celebration vs Protest
By Ted White 2007

Should Critical Mass be a celebration of global bicycle culture or a protest against a world obsessed with cars? Should Critical Mass (CM) be a joyous rolling festival or a righteous demand for a better life for cyclists? Can it be both?

For mainstream journalists, labeling CM as a protest has allowed for a repeatedly negative portrayal of CM and its participants. Since most people see media representations of Critical Mass before they see an actual ride, this association with CM as a protest makes many of the non-biking masses distrustful of what they think CM is. So what are the virtues of protests? Protests demand rights where they are absent or lacking. The 1960's lunch counter sit-ins at segregated coffee shops in the South demanded equal rights for blacks. The National Grape Boycott (later in the 60's) helped improve conditions for the United Farm Workers. Various tree sits in the last two decades have protected old-growth trees and vulnerable habitat from corporate chainsaws. But what about Critical Mass?

Personally, I see CM as an assertion, a legal claiming of rights to the road. For me, it is simply an activity which is exhilarating, conspicuously fun and highly social which also bumps up against cultural boundaries, and rolls over notions of status and consumption. Urban bicycling is a radically empowering activity and all

we have to do to make it real is get out there and pedal—this makes CM something to celebrate—again and again and again.

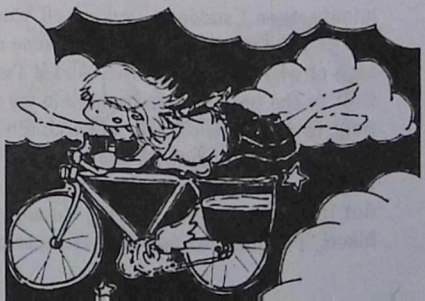
A century ago, Critical Mass' predecessor "The Good Roads Movement" of the 1880's saw the nation's first bicyclists joining forces with farmers to protest the muddy, pock-marked country roads in favor of smoother, safer, (and faster) paved roads. Eventually that movement gave way to promoting better roads mostly for---cars! Pretty ironic.

In retrospect it seems like the fact that the Good Roads Movement had an agenda meant that this agenda could be twisted and co-opted.

If Critical Mass is a protest, then it lacks this set agenda. It's goals too diffuse— But if CM is a celebration, then it's open, inclusive structure and high immunity to being co-opted seem like irresistible virtues.

I've been on many Critical Mass rides in San Francisco,CA, and participated in a few others in Eugene, OR, Portland, OR, New York City, and Amherst, MA. While making the film We Are Traffic! I listened to many stories from Critical Massers around the globe. My simple analysis: the places where Critical Mass has focused on being a celebration rather than a protest have had the most long running success. Where costumes, musical instruments, customized bikes, and smiles given freely take precedence—Critical Mass has a good chance of flourishing. When chanted slogans, random road blocking and testosterone fueled confrontations rule the day—then Mass will likely be short lived.

When thinking of all this, one annoyingly familiar image that comes to mind is riding in a sizable critical mass down a four lane road (two lanes in each direction) and noticing that one or two riders are riding in the far left lane while everyone else is riding en mass in the right lane. I've seen this phenomenon in every place I've ever done CM. To my mind, those one or two



riders blocking car traffic in the left lane are protesting, while the rest of us are celebrating. The fact that there are always only one or two in that left lane seems to suggest that Critical Mass just isn't meant to be a protest.

So many attitudes and policies in our sad country are grossly dysfunctional. Our willingness to go to war, our limited ability to control our own births and deaths, our two party-elections system, our federal energy policy, our hypocritical stance on immigration. All this and a lot more needs protesting. But when it comes to Critical Mass I'll take a break and celebrate something we can all do together right here and right now. Ride!

It's Critical Mass, and it's complex.
Ayleen Crotty

If I'm late to pick up my kid from day care because my boss was dicking me around and the day care person is charging me $1 a minute, then I suddenly find myself stuck behind a sea of 300 cyclists, I'm going to have a hard time understanding their message of why I shouldn't drive. And if I've been working a long shift in the hot sun as a roofer and my muscles ache and all I want to do is down a beer while chillin' in my back yard but I'm stuck behind 300 cyclists and some are shouting "Fuck cars!", I'm going to have a hard time thinking they're on to something. But if I'm on my bike, cruising through the city with 400 other bikers, I'm going to feel a great sense of freedom and camaraderie. It's gonna be great. Maybe I was looking forward to it all day. Maybe I'm seeing people I only see once a month.

Disclaimer: I've been entrenched in CM for a long time. In 1995 I founded a CM ride in my old town of Urbana-

Champaign, Illinois. It was back when there wasn't much of an internet but I was able to send away for a start-your-own starter pack of flyers I could xerox for our rides.

Then I moved to Portland, Oregon - bike Mecca - and of course I became heavily involved in Critical Mass. But the cops cracked down, off and on. I went to meetings with the mayor and the cops and my friends - said my piece, fought the good fight. While this carried on for years, other free opportunities to gather with bikers popped up like crazy and I found my interest in CM completely dissipating. There came to be a fun event every week, winter spring summer and fall. I began to see postivity throughout the events. I saw new people coming and starting to ride bikes more. We were having more fun than ever. And CM had ceased to be fun. Getting harassed by cops is not fun. Having to stop at every red light because the police are watching is not fun.

But mostly I thought about that parent trying to get home and that roofer who is aching for a beer. And I thought about the best way to get them excited about biking. And I thought about our fun, quirky free events. I knew that through CM we weren't getting the message across that we were trying to. And all of a sudden, CM didn't make any sense to me. Portland had become beyond Critical Mass. But before I sign off on that note, I want to make it clear that CM does serve a higher purpose. In my opinion, what CM does most successfully is to give people a sense of community. It allows bikers to meet bikers, share ideas, tips and ask questions. It lets a biker know he/she's not the only one out there battling dangerous road users and dreaming of

safer, friendlier streets. And there's no doubt in my mind that our bike culture is as rich as it is because of our many years meeting on the last Friday of the month to celebrate bike culture and ride Critical Mass together.

But if we truly want to convince more people that bikes are the way to go, we need to think like they think, approach them where they are in their lives and make it fun.

More information on Portland's fun bike culture can be found at the ShiftToBikrs.org website.

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Ayleen Crotty is a bike culturist living in Portland, Oregon. In her free time, she likes to travel to other cities and meet fellow bikers and tries to time these visits to coincide with the city's CM ride. Ayleen has lived car free since 2001.

Time pedals on for Critical Mass

JOSEPH ROSE

Originally appeared in "The Oregonian"

On a winter night in 2005, Portland Mayor Tom Potter snapped on his bike helmet and pedaled through a steady drizzle with 250 cyclists on the monthly Critical Mass ride.

After a month in office, Potter was keeping a campaign promise to the city's two-wheeled set. At one point, someone in the pack rolling through downtown pulled alongside the mayor and apologized

that more riders had not shown up. "Probably the rain," the mayor said, chuckling from his recumbent bike.

Shift to the summer of 2007. The number of "massers" who showed up Friday night for the monthly demonstration for cyclists' rights: 15.

Critical Mass -- once a traffic-clogging solidarity movement that swarmed the streets with leg muscle and blinking lights, enraging motorists, occasionally prompting police to break out the pepper spray and demanding attention from the halls of power -- has deflated in Bike City U.S.A.

For years, it was common for the event to draw 300 to 500 cyclists, sometimes teetering between celebration and anarchy. One 2003 ride drew more than 1,500 participants. But this year, the monthly rush-hour gatherings have struggled to top a dozen pedalers.

Where did the mass in Critical Mass go?

Some bikers say they stopped participating in the 14-year-old ride because of what they see as draconian police patrols. But others questioned whether a protest against automobile dominance is needed any longer in a town widely considered the nation's most bike-friendly.

"My feeling is that most people in the bike scene have just moved on," said Jonathan Maus, who tracks Portland's flourishing and often eccentric bike culture on his bikeportland.org blog. "Evolution has something to do with it. We've made considerable gains in this city and we don't need Critical Mass any more to say, 'Hey, we're here!' "

That's not to say that Critical Mass, which takes place in more than 200 cities around the globe on the last Friday night of each month, is dying everywhere. Earlier this year in San Francisco, Critical Mass cyclists smashed windows on a minivan that drove into the pack, terrifying the family inside. Since then, crowds ranging from 1,000 to 2,000 have pedaled peacefully through downtown with a heavy police escort.

But in Portland, where police spent $20,083 for 225 officers to patrol Critical Mass last year, police haven't even bothered patrolling most of this year's rides because of the small turnout.

It wasn't too long ago that police saw the leaderless gatherings as a menace to public safety, requiring stern enforcement. The August 2002 ride exploded into confrontation with officers using pepper spray, firing a stun gun and pulling unruly

cyclists from their bikes. Nine were arrested.

In 2004, with the mayoral race in high gear, clashes between riders and police were the norm. Potter told bicycle activists that if he were elected he would go on a Critical Mass ride to check out their claims of police harassment.

Eventually, a few things changed. Cyclists had long complained about police using motorcycles on the ride, saying the sound and speed escalated tensions. Officers switched to bicycles, which made police seem less antagonistic, said Mark Ginsberg, a Portland lawyer who often defends bicyclists.

"We started to see fewer riders who were looking for a yelling match with police," Ginsberg said. "Certainly, that was one reason for the drop."

Still, police refused to relax their ticketing of cyclists who rolled through stop signs and blocked intersections to allow the pack to keep moving, a practice called "corking."

That wasn't going to happen, said Lt. Mark Kruger, acting head of the police bureau's Traffic Division. With officers enforcing every stop sign, the ride could no longer flow, amoebalike, through the city.

"I guess that took a lot of the fun out of it," he said.

While the monthly demonstration has acted as an incubator for bicycle activism in Portland, some former riders also said they tired of the negativity and blamed the media for sensationalizing the actions of a few radicals.

Dan Miller, a 39-year-old North Portland cyclist who once frequented the last-Friday rides, won't mourn Critical Mass if it dies. He has moved on. Not hard in Portland, where it's easy to join a group ride without police chaperones during any given week, he said.

Indeed, 250 people rolled en masse through town to kick off last month's Pedalpalooza festivities. Two days later, the World Naked Bike Ride drew 800 people who showed off a lot more than their pedal pride. On a smaller scale, it's not unheard of for weekend bike moves to attract up to 30 cyclists hauling an entire household, including furniture, from one place to another.

Some streets, Miller said, are frequently an unintentional critical mass. People just invest a lot in names. "A certain thorny-stemmed flower," he said, "is still a certain thorny-stemmed flower by another name."

Shortly after 6 p.m. Friday, a rider rang his bike

bell and shouted, "Let's do it!" Police nearly outnumbered bicyclists as the small cluster left the North Park Blocks, heading west on Burnside Street. Within 10 minutes, the riders had lost one another in traffic. Critical Mass 2007 was on the books. Jeremy Szold Ginzberg, a 54-year-old Northeast Portland writer and Critical Mass veteran, said he showed up with hopes that the gentle summer night would draw a respectable crowd.

"I miss the big rides," Ginzberg said, "but I think they'll return. Something will happen, maybe an invasion of Iran or $6-a-gallon gas prices, and the bicyclists in this city will feel the need to get out and make a statement again."

Some further internet resources:

www.democracynow.org/article.pl?sid=04/08/30/1453256
www.bikesummer.org/2006/history/history.php
www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR1382/MR1382.ch10.pdf
www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/c/a/2007/04/28/MNGF2PHDCK1.DTL
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www.democracynow.org/article.pl?sid=05/03/28/1434209
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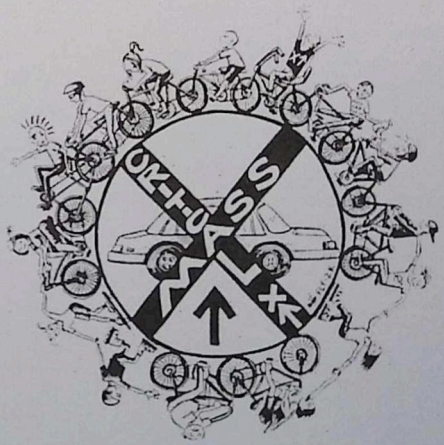
www.bikeforums.net/showthread.php?t=284556



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